



## Mastery and Masquerade in the Transatlantic Blues Revival

Ross Cole

To cite this article: Ross Cole (2018) Mastery and Masquerade in the Transatlantic Blues Revival, Journal of the Royal Musical Association, 143:1, 173-210, DOI: [10.1080/02690403.2018.1434352](https://doi.org/10.1080/02690403.2018.1434352)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02690403.2018.1434352>



© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 26 Mar 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 85



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Mastery and Masquerade in the Transatlantic Blues Revival

ROSS COLE

We wear the mask that grins and lies,  
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes, —  
This debt we pay to human guile;  
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,  
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

(Paul Laurence Dunbar)<sup>1</sup>

WHEN Dunbar, the most celebrated African American poet of the Reconstruction era, published his terse commentary on the trauma of racism ‘We Wear the Mask’, he distilled an abiding facet of the relationship of black to white: whether slave or free, African Americans had been forced to perform a veneer of mirth veiling an inner self torn asunder. Indebted to and necessitated by artful deception and the tactics of trickery, this figurative disguise – manifest in expressive culture as well as the ‘myriad subtleties’ of vernacular language – is the mask of racial alterity. What Dunbar is implying is that black voices of both acquiescence and resistance were mediated by this process of masquerade. The meanings and histories of black music, in consequence, are complex and polysemous. As Charles Keil affirmed in 1966, black music functions as a ‘projective test’ through which ‘white liberals, black militants, and others of varying pigmentation and persuasion hear in the blues essentially what they want to hear, find in the blues ethos what they expect to find’.<sup>2</sup> Such insights serve as a perennial warning for scholars caught up in what Ronald Radano and Philip Bohlman have called the ‘racial imagination’ – a network of unexamined assumptions that lead us to view music

Email: [rgc30@cam.ac.uk](mailto:rgc30@cam.ac.uk)

I wish to thank Sam Barrett, Philip V. Bohlman, Jennifer Chisholm, Nicholas Cook, Marina Frolova-Walker, George E. Lewis, J. Griffith Rollefson, Tania Saeed and the anonymous reviewers for this journal. Special thanks to Peter Goldsmith for sharing his thoughts with me. Funding for this project was provided by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council.

<sup>1</sup> Paul Laurence Dunbar, *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1896), 167. See also Joanne Braxton and Lauri Ramey, ‘Paul Laurence Dunbar’, *The Cambridge Companion to American Poets*, ed. Mark Richardson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 136–43.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1966), vii.

in the terms of a racializing binary.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the omnipresent spectre of race works to conceal the intricate processes through which a difference too often read as natural is generated and maintained via the relationship between discourse, performance and lived experience. A Foucauldian collusion of discipline and knowledge sets the stage for such interactions: a ‘politics of domination’, bell hooks argues, informs the way in which the majority of images we consume are constructed and marketed.<sup>4</sup> For hooks, therefore, the ‘collective crisis’ of black identity – underwritten by images that ‘dehumanize and colonize’ – is marked by an asymmetrical gaze.<sup>5</sup>

In what follows, I examine two highly influential and yet largely overlooked television programmes broadcast in Britain during the early 1960s entitled *I Hear the Blues* and *The Blues and Gospel Train*. Reading against the grain of their reception by paying close attention to the manner in which they employed visual signifiers to establish and validate a particular interpretation of the blues for a white audience, I want to suggest that such environments offer a way of understanding the constitutive relationship between racial identity, spectatorship and performativity.

These two programmes were symptomatic of what one *Observer* critic described in 1964 as a ‘teenage blues craze’ in which ‘the original, great, Negro blues singers’ of America – often ‘rediscovered’ and positively characterized as ‘primitive’, ‘anguished’ or even ‘sinister’ – were brought over for annual ‘barnstorming’ tours of Europe.<sup>6</sup> As one fan who attended both shows later noted, ‘Many of us in the audience, hearing authentic black music for the first time, were simply awe-struck.’<sup>7</sup> Tacitly drawing on nineteenth-century evolutionary philosophy, these events were habitually received in the British media as a ‘living blues history’ presented by ‘American Negroes rooted indigenously in the different stages of the music’s development’.<sup>8</sup> Taking a cue from Frantz Fanon’s view that the genre is indelibly marked by the history of slavery, exploitation and oppression, I argue that blues revivalism forced African American artists into assuming the mask of blackface minstrelsy – that is, to embody racialized difference in a lucrative relational fantasy generated to fulfil white demand.<sup>9</sup> As an exercise in what Radano and Bohlman term the (ethno)musicology of engagement,

<sup>3</sup> Ronald Radano and Philip V. Bohlman, ‘Introduction: Music and Race, their Past, their Presence’, *Music and the Racial Imagination*, ed. Radano and Bohlman (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1–53.

<sup>4</sup> bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, new edn (New York: Routledge, 2015), 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 6. On this point more broadly, see Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> ‘Briefing: Blues in their Might’, *The Observer*, 18 October 1964, 23.

<sup>7</sup> Email correspondence with Peter Goldsmith, 24 July 2016.

<sup>8</sup> George Melly, ‘A Freak Festival’, *The Observer*, 17 October 1965, 25. A long history of developmentalist thinking underlay this point; see, for example, Rachel Mundy, ‘Evolutionary Categories and Musical Style from Adler to America’, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 67 (2014), 735–67.

<sup>9</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution: Political Essays*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 37. On the history of blackface, see Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, new edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

my rereading of such events – conditioned by legacies of essentialism drawn up under colonialism and the long shadows of black Atlantic interculturalism – is an attempt at liberation from primitivist thinking and what Fanon described as an exaltation of the past at the expense of the present and future.<sup>10</sup> This article is thus a critique of and safeguard against musical investment in what Henry Louis Gates, Jr describes as the ‘sentimental romance of alterity’.<sup>11</sup>

Given an obsession in blues revivalist milieux with recorded sound (manifesting an impulse to collect, catalogue and control traces of sonic Otherness), the spectacle of live performance has often been relegated to a gendered domain of ephemerality, diversion and charade. Only recently has work emerged that destabilizes this schism by drawing attention to neglected imbrications between blues and theatricality reaching far back through the genre’s roots in southern vaudeville, minstrelsy and tent shows.<sup>12</sup> Black music, moreover, manifests what Katrina Thompson describes as a ‘dynamic of agency, masquerade, and subjugation’ first scripted during the Middle Passage and the violent stagecraft of chattel slavery.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, Paige McGinley notes, blues artists were adept at inhabiting a variety of dramatic personae, ‘always working *with and within* the mise-en-scène of the stage’.<sup>14</sup> Directing renewed attention towards performance and spectatorship as modes of analysis yields the tools for a more productive negotiation of the troubled relationship between essentialism and constructionism – unreconciled approaches that still, in Michael Taussig’s words, ‘oscillate wildly in a death-struggle over the claims of mimesis’.<sup>15</sup> As Paul Gilroy warned over 20 years ago, the only politically acceptable response to this impasse requires a delicate ‘anti-antiessentialism’ that avoids both the absolutist aspects of black nationalism and the revisionist arrogance of deconstruction by focusing on the hybrid, fractal and synthetic history of a paradoxically ‘*changing same*’.<sup>16</sup> Gilroy

<sup>10</sup> See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 174–81.

<sup>11</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr, *Tradition and the Black Atlantic: Critical Theory in the African Diaspora* (New York: BasicCivitas, 2010), 102.

<sup>12</sup> See *Ramblin’ on my Mind: New Perspectives on the Blues*, ed. David Evans (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008), and Paige A. McGinley, *Staging the Blues: From Tent Shows to Tourism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Katrina Dyonne Thompson, *Ring Shout, Wheel About: The Racial Politics of Music and Dance in North American Slavery* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 2.

<sup>14</sup> McGinley, *Staging the Blues*, 6. See also Philip Auslander, ‘Musical Personae’, *Drama Review*, 50/1 (spring 2006), 100–19.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), xv.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Gilroy, ‘Sounds Authentic: Black Music, Ethnicity, and the Challenge of a *Changing Same*’, *Black Music Research Journal*, 11 (1991), 111–36. Gilroy was drawing on the work of LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) in *Black Music* (New York: William Morrow, 1968). See also LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow, 1963), and J. Griffith Rollefson, ‘The “Robot Voodoo Power” Thesis: Afrofuturism and Anti-Anti-Essentialism from Sun Ra to Kool Keith’, *Black Music Research Journal*, 28 (2008), 83–109.

argued that although black identity is 'often felt to be natural and spontaneous, it remains the outcome of practical activity' whereby reciprocal significations 'produce the imaginary effect of an internal racial core or essence by acting on the body through the specific mechanisms of identification and recognition that are produced in the intimate interaction of performer and crowd'.<sup>17</sup> In making this argument, Gilroy was alluding to Judith Butler's claim that 'acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body' through corporeal signs, discourse and enactment – in other words, performatively.<sup>18</sup>

A renewed, postcolonial focus on the relationship between racialization and performativity answers Taussig's appeal for release from the 'suffocating hold' of constructionism while keeping critical distance from what Gilroy has since referred to as 'raciology's brutal reasoning' – an afterimage that results from 'looking too casually into the damaging glare emanating from colonial conflicts'.<sup>19</sup> As E. Patrick Johnson reminds us, blackness functions as a signifier – an elusive and mutable nexus continually reappropriated through performance under the contingent pressures of circumstance.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, he states, attention to the performative aspects of race should not lead us to overlook the visceral effects of racialized thinking that 'vary materially, politically, socially, and culturally depending on the body on which it settles'.<sup>21</sup> Those subordinated by such repercussions have historically employed the very concept and imposed conditions of racial subjugation as tools to build traditions of political resistance, solidarity, self-definition and exuberant creative expression.<sup>22</sup> Symptomatic of this process of bricolage in black culture is what Houston A. Baker, Jr describes as 'the psychodrama of the minstrel mask' arising within a discursive field mapped by the intersection of formal mastery and deformation.<sup>23</sup> The two case studies that I pursue here are indicative of this convoluted history of semblance and the deep ambivalence shown by white modernity towards the vernacular musical counterculture of its internal subalterns – in Johnson's words, a blackness both 'loved and averted, pitied and ridiculed, embraced and repulsed'.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), 102.

<sup>18</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 185. More broadly, see Jonathan Culler, 'Philosophy and Literature: The Fortunes of the Performative', *Poetics Today*, 21 (2000), 503–19.

<sup>19</sup> Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, xix; Gilroy, *Against Race*, 7, 37.

<sup>20</sup> E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 218. On this point, see Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr, 'The Pot Liquor Principle: Developing a Black Music Criticism in American Music Studies', *Journal of Black Studies*, 35 (2003–4), 210–23.

<sup>22</sup> Gilroy, *Against Race*, 12; see also Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, new edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>23</sup> Houston A. Baker, Jr, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 18.

<sup>24</sup> Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness*, 251.

## The deepest strains of Negro music

Before approaching these two broadcasts, it is worth sketching out the horizons of expectation that white blues fans in both Britain and the US brought to their reception of a genre with which they had had little or no direct contact. In December 1960, the *New York Times* music critic Robert Shelton – later famous for his veneration of a young Bob Dylan – published an article entitled ‘Country Blues: Growing Field for Research’.<sup>25</sup> Interest in this ‘fascinating area of native music’, he wrote, was on the increase owing to its ability to attract the attention of progressively factional coterie of jazz and folk music devotees.<sup>26</sup> The country blues, Shelton proposed,

is the proud product of the American Negro, an outgrowth of the work song and field holler, rooted in personal experience, wrapped in trouble and performed in a manner that is catharsis as well as entertainment. Unlike a good deal of the commercial blues, rock ‘n’ roll, rhythm and blues or city blues, honesty of expression and meaningfulness to the performer are keystones of the parent country-blues form.<sup>27</sup>

The renaissance of interest in this area, he noted, had led to the release of ‘many off-the-beaten-track records’ from the 1920s and 1930s, staggeringly detailed discographic work and ‘field collectors scurrying to look for more men’ to add to their esoteric compendia.<sup>28</sup> Predicated on obscurity, masculinity, expressive sincerity, suffering, racial difference and the agrarian south, the value system underlying involvement in this aspect of African American culture was not hard to detect. Indeed, Keil dubbed the fans adopting these restrictive ideals ‘moldy figs’: in their work, he writes, ‘the romanticizing motive or element’ is omnipresent.<sup>29</sup> Above all, such music appeared to exist in a world entirely insulated from mass commerce.

The leading authorities on the blues, Shelton noted, were Britain’s Paul Oliver and the American Samuel B. Charters – two white authors who would become crucial gatekeepers to ideals of authenticity within the revivalist imagination, furnishing the evaluative frames through which blues artists were judged. In 1959, as a result of field trips across the south in search of aging singers, Charters published a seminal book entitled *The Country Blues*.<sup>30</sup> Although claiming to discuss ‘every major blues artist’ and situate the genre in relation to ‘its own audience’, Charters chose to dwell

<sup>25</sup> Robert Shelton, ‘Country Blues: Growing Field for Research’, *New York Times*, 11 December 1960, 15.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Keil, *Urban Blues*, 34–5. Keil found British blues fans of the 1960s to be the worst culprits in this patronizing veneration of racialized marginality, senility and primitivism – sitting in silent awe and offering ‘thunderous’ applause for what he likened to a ‘third-rate minstrel show’ (p. 37).

<sup>30</sup> Samuel B. Charters, *The Country Blues* (New York: Rinehart, 1959). The book was made available in Britain shortly after its American publication via the Jazz Book Club (London: Michael Joseph, 1961); this is the edition from which I quote.

on a highly selective canon of enigmatic and exclusively male singer-guitarists such as Blind Lemon Jefferson and Robert Johnson.<sup>31</sup> For Charters, real blues afforded access to the inner world of the artist and was therefore at odds with any overt act of showmanship: 'A blues', he stressed, 'is a personal song, with intensely personal emotional characteristics.'<sup>32</sup> Country blues, he declared, was 'an intense individual expression of the deepest strains of Negro music in the South'.<sup>33</sup> The artist featuring most prominently as an archetype in Charters's book and in acoustic recordings released the same year on Folkways Records was Sam Lightnin' Hopkins:

Lightnin', in his way, is a magnificent figure. He is one of the last of his kind, a lonely, bitter man who brings to the blues the intensity and pain of the hours in the hot sun, scraping the earth, singing to make the hours pass. The blues will go on, but the country blues, and the great singers who created from the raw singing of the work songs and the field cries the richness and variety of the country blues, will pass with men like this thin, intense singer.<sup>34</sup>

The great irony is that prior to meeting and being recorded by Charters, Hopkins had been performing up-tempo R&B and boogie-woogie for Herald Records, employing amplified electric guitar, bass and drums.<sup>35</sup> Much like Big Bill Broonzy, Hopkins was adept at reinventing himself for new audiences, deftly adopting a 'folk' persona for professional gain and financial recompense when required.<sup>36</sup>

The following year, Oliver published a book across the Atlantic building on the groundwork Charters had laid entitled *Blues Fell This Morning: The Meaning of the Blues*. Oliver's conceptualization of authenticity was predicated on a similar belief that blues lyrics provided a straightforward window onto the intricacies of African American existence. Throughout the book Oliver emphasizes that 'the blues singer is a realist' whose 'statements are accurate portrayals of his state of mind, uninhibited in their self-expression'.<sup>37</sup> Disregarding these artists' theatrical virtuosity, imagination, lyrical craft and playful personifications while betraying what George Lipsitz condemns

<sup>31</sup> Charters, *The Country Blues*, 11.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 181. Several LPs were released to coincide with the book, including a compilation album by Charters entitled *The Country Blues* (RBF Records, RF1, 1959) and Charters's own field recordings of Hopkins entitled *Lightnin' Hopkins* (Folkways Records, FS3822, 1959).

<sup>35</sup> See Timothy J. O'Brien and David Ensminger, *Mojo Hand: The Life and Music of Lightnin' Hopkins* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2013).

<sup>36</sup> See William Broonzy, *Big Bill Blues: William Broonzy's Story as Told to Yannick Bruynoghe* (London: Cassell, 1955), and Bob Riesman, *I Feel So Good: The Life and Times of Big Bill Broonzy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

<sup>37</sup> Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: The Meaning of the Blues* (London: Cassell, 1960), 59–61. For more detail, see Christian O'Connell, *Blues, How Do You Do? Paul Oliver and the Transatlantic Story of the Blues* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2015).



as an 'aestheticization of social pain', what Oliver seemed to find most fascinating was that this 'hard realism' and brutal self-examination indicated 'that the singer has come close to moral and mental disintegration'.<sup>38</sup> Oliver's aesthetic valorization of such plain-spoken outpouring was based on the fundamental view that country blues was 'essentially a folk form of expression, at its best when least self-conscious, [and] when least sophisticated'.<sup>39</sup> What followed logically from this conclusion was an emphasis on the genre's cultural and indeed racial particularity. 'Only the American Negro', he maintained, 'can sing the blues'; 'the true and complete integration of the Negro into American society' would consequently bring about 'the death of a folk art form of great simplicity, beauty, and meaning'.<sup>40</sup> Thus, the very music prized by politically liberal white aficionados purportedly thrived only under the conditions of white racist oppression. Such views led Ralph Ellison in 1964 to characterize Oliver's book as a 'sadly misdirected effort'.<sup>41</sup>

Tellingly, *The Country Blues* and *Blues Fell This Morning* both make explicit reference to the work of John and Alan Lomax – pioneers of field recording in the southern US whose tales of song hunting are well known.<sup>42</sup> Testament to a long tradition of folkloric thinking, John Lomax had gone in search of African American singers during the Great Depression as living embodiments of Harvard ballad school theory, believing that isolated communities shed light on orality in its most natural and uncompromised state. Lomax described the music of the segregated convicts he encountered as appealing to 'primitive instinct': 'The words, the music, the peculiar rhythm', he declared, were 'the natural emotional outpouring of the black man in confinement'.<sup>43</sup> Aiming to locate songs that 'in musical phrasing and poetic content [were] most unlike those of the white race, the least contaminated by white influence or by the modern Negro jazz', Lomax was eventually rewarded with the discovery of the songster Huddie Ledbetter, better known by his prison sobriquet Lead Belly.<sup>44</sup> A 1939 article in the *Washington Post* demonstrates how, through Lomax's gestures of

<sup>38</sup> George Lipsitz, 'Remembering Robert Johnson: Romance and Reality', *Popular Music and Society*, 21/4 (winter 1997), 39–50 (p. 40); Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, 299, 61.

<sup>39</sup> Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning*, 304.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 5, 310.

<sup>41</sup> Ralph Ellison, 'Blues People', *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage International, 1995), 247–58 (p. 257).

<sup>42</sup> See Nolan Porterfield, *Last Cavalier: The Life and Times of John A. Lomax, 1867–1948* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1996), and John Szwed, *The Man Who Recorded the World: A Biography of Alan Lomax* (London: William Heinemann, 2010).

<sup>43</sup> John A. Lomax, '"Sinful Songs" of the Southern Negro', *Musical Quarterly*, 20 (1934), 177–87 (p. 177).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 181; for accounts of this interaction, see Charles Wolfe and Kip Lornell, *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1999), and William G. Roy, *Reds, Whites, and Blues: Social Movements, Folk Music, and Race in the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).



discursive curation, Ledbetter was cast as the paradigmatic blues artist – imprisoned in a trap where his success was inseparable from racialized exoticism:

The music of this untutored genius was not the popular old-time ballads nor the ragtime of tin-pan alley, nor even jazz or swing as we know them today. It was the blues. It was the mournful, slow chant that began 300 years ago among the tobacco slaves and was improved by the cotton pickers. It was the emotional, rhythmical, primitive wail that provided the base and spark to present-day jazz [...]. [Blues songs] are devoted to relating the reactions of a simple people to the basic problems of spirit and body that confront them.<sup>45</sup>

Indeed, Lomax was instrumental in promulgating the relationship between black masculinity, primitivism and instinctual expressivity vital to white investment in the blues – initiating a turn towards the representation of individual musicians as ‘folk artists’.<sup>46</sup> This shift was made explicit in the frontispiece to *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly*, in which Ledbetter poses barefoot in dungarees on a stack of cotton sacks flanked by wooden barrels. Such methods of authenticating black musicians via rural stagecraft would set a lasting precedent for the blues revival. The subordinate status forced upon black music, in short, became the very reason for its allure.

Both Charters and Oliver confessed in prefaces to later editions of their books to a catalogue of errors, omissions and misrepresentations.<sup>47</sup> Even at the time, the critic George Melly raised a seldom-aired ‘moral doubt’ about a genre rooted ‘in the bitter soil of racial inequality’ being sold to British audiences as entertainment.<sup>48</sup> Revisionist scholars have since been assiduous in uncovering the ways in which work arising out of the blues revival has generated a narrowly ideological and empirically unsatisfying reading of African American history still prevalent in the popular sphere. Iconoclastic work including Elijah Wald’s *Escaping the Delta* and Marybeth Hamilton’s *In Search of the Blues* has forced us to rethink the basis of blues as a genre and the validity of so-called ‘country blues’ in particular.<sup>49</sup> Constructing an expedient distinction between ‘commercial’ (feminine, melodramatic, extrovert) and ‘rural’ (masculine, confessional, introvert) blues, they show, revivalists denied the role of hugely successful performers such as Gertrude ‘Ma’ Rainey and Bessie Smith, and deliberately turned their back on the lewd, humorous, versatile, hybrid and undeniably commercial aspects of early twentieth-century popular song.

<sup>45</sup> Bill Gottlieb, ‘Blues of Today Are Formal Versions of Original Tunes’, *Washington Post*, 26 March 1939, 7.

<sup>46</sup> John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly* (New York: Macmillan, 1936), xiii.

<sup>47</sup> Samuel B. Charters, *The Country Blues*, rev. edn (New York: Da Capo Press, 1975); Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues*, rev. edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>48</sup> Melly, ‘A Freak Festival’.

<sup>49</sup> Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (New York: Amistad, 2004); Marybeth Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues: Black Voices, White Visions* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007).

In attempting to evacuate the past of mythology, however, these scholars miss a critical point: what was significant for revivalists during the 1960s was precisely the mythology of blues they wish to see expunged. As David Brackett argues, acts of debunking ‘risk merely substituting one myth for another in the name of revealing the truth’ – a truth that may erase more than it reveals.<sup>50</sup> It was this mythology more than anything else that inspired white fans to explore the genre anew, creating both material benefits and psychological burdens for African American artists. Veteran recording star Lonnie Johnson protested in 1963, for example, that British audiences ‘expect to see an old man coming out on crutches, and when they see me they often say “you must be his son, or something” ... these stories really have hurt me’.<sup>51</sup> Later in the interview, Johnson adds that the revival had nonetheless been ‘good for every blues singer financially speaking’.<sup>52</sup> We should, therefore, think of blues mythology operating as what Joseph Roach terms a surrogate or effigy.<sup>53</sup> The search for pure origins, Roach suggests, is a repetitious voyage of displacement in which ‘memory reveals itself as imagination’.<sup>54</sup> Masking the interracial encounters, commercialism and hybridities of the genre’s history with tantalizing performative substitutes, the transatlantic blues revival is a surrogate *par excellence*.

With its rudiments traceable back through Atlantic slavery to the modal, material and rhetorical traditions of what Gerhard Kubik pinpoints as the west central Sudanic region of Africa, blues music nevertheless arrives in the American twentieth century through the mediation of a competitive urban marketplace and tropes of cultural expectation attuned to the lineaments of blackface minstrelsy.<sup>55</sup> Channelled through white anticipation, blues thus animates a process of invention, Richard Middleton argues, in which lost, absent or mythic origins are ‘conjured up, brought into the present, re-configured’; as such, he reasons, it is a genre ‘always already’ revived.<sup>56</sup> However, rather than epitomizing – in Middleton’s formulation – a ‘revival without a source’, I want to argue that revivalist blues performatively constitutes its own roots by selectively rearranging the fabric of history to suit a particular vision.<sup>57</sup> As with folklore traditions more broadly, revivalist blues is a cultural talisman arising when the

<sup>50</sup> David Brackett, ‘Preaching Blues’, *Black Music Research Journal*, 32/1 (spring 2012), 113–36 (p. 115). Useful counterbalances to such ‘debunking’ include Steven Garabedian, ‘Reds, Whites, and the Blues: Lawrence Gellert, “Negro Songs of Protest”, and the Left-Wing Folk-Song Revival of the 1930s and 1940s’, *American Quarterly*, 57 (2005), 179–206, and R. A. Lawson, *Jim Crow’s Counterculture: The Blues and Black Southerners, 1890–1945* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2010).

<sup>51</sup> ‘You’re In Love with the Blues’, *Melody Maker*, 26 October 1963, 6.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 36.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>55</sup> Gerhard Kubik, *Africa and the Blues* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1999).

<sup>56</sup> Richard Middleton, ‘O Brother, Let’s Go Down Home: Loss, Nostalgia and the Blues’, *Popular Music*, 26 (2007), 47–64 (pp. 48, 51).

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

rapid encroachment of industrial capitalism, technological progress, globalization or proliferating mass culture breeds feelings of alienation from some former prelapsarian condition and an associated desire for stability, resistance, primitivism or restoration.<sup>58</sup> Situating a minority's culture as the instrumental antithesis of or antidote to a reviled mainstream, folkloric chimeras are generated recursively at moments of accelerating social change. Indeed, the blues revival existed as one element within a larger folk revival gripping the transatlantic world in the post-war period, driven by young middle-class fans intent on rediscovering music that seemed to be jeopardized by the inexorable onslaught of modernity.<sup>59</sup>

### A living history of the blues

1964 seemed to herald a watershed moment in British blues subculture. During the autumn of 1963 a series of articles appeared in the pages of *Melody Maker* indicating that the movement was gaining unprecedented recognition: in October, a short interview with Lonnie Johnson was printed under the headline 'You're In Love with the Blues'; a similar piece on Muddy Waters followed in November entitled 'London – It's the New Chicago!'; and the following month a review bore the title 'Thrilling Blues Package – at Peak-Viewing Time'.<sup>60</sup> Attention had been growing throughout the early 1960s, with *Melody Maker* identifying what it termed an 'R and B boom' in January 1963 with respect to the underground music of Cyril Davies, Alexis Korner and the Rolling Stones.<sup>61</sup> Presciently, this article worried that a 'bandwagon' such as this rhythm and blues revival might recapitulate 'the story of trad all over again with purist v popster battles and all the other controversies that have made the trad road rocky for so long'.<sup>62</sup> As predicted, vociferous debates began to surface in the pages of fledgling blues fanzines and more established jazz periodicals – most notably, between the purist stance promoted by *Blues Unlimited* (the journal of the Blues Appreciation Society,

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, Regina Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997); Tamara E. Livingston, 'Music Revivals: Toward a General Theory', *Ethnomusicology*, 43 (1999), 66–85; and *The Oxford Handbook of Music Revival*, ed. Caroline Bithell and Juniper Hill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). See also Ross Cole, 'Ballads, Blues, and Alterity' (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2015).

<sup>59</sup> Ross Cole, 'Industrial Balladry, Mass Culture, and the Politics of Realism in Cold War Britain', *Journal of Musicology*, 34 (2017), 354–90. See also Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), and Ronald D. Cohen and Rachel Clare Donaldson, *Roots of the Revival: American and British Folk Music in the 1950s* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2014).

<sup>60</sup> 'You're In Love with the Blues'; 'London – It's the New Chicago!' *Melody Maker*, 2 November 1963, 6; 'Thrilling Blues Package – at Peak-Viewing Time', *Melody Maker*, 28 December 1963, 3.

<sup>61</sup> Chris Roberts, 'Trend or Tripe', *Melody Maker*, 5 January 1963, 5.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* On the trad scene, see George McKay, *Circular Breathing: The Cultural Politics of Jazz in Britain* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

launched in 1963) and the more eclectic or contemporary outlook of publications such as *R'NB Scene* (launched the following year). What these embattled factions shared, however, was a mutual antipathy towards the commercial mainstream. The editor of *R'NB Scene* Roger Eagle remarked in 1964, for example, that blues was 'a consistent attraction for people who want to hear music with some guts to it, as opposed to the watery wailings of so many of the "pop" groups'.<sup>63</sup>

British fans were also united through their obsessive enthusiasm for live or recorded performances of the annual American Folk Blues Festival – a package tour orchestrated by the German jazz promoters Horst Lippmann and Fritz Rau commencing in 1962 which featured a diverse array of legendary African American blues artists. Writing in January 1964, the editor of *Blues Unlimited* Simon Napier proposed that the new year might represent 'the big break through' for devotees; on 18 December 1963, he wrote, 'came the ultimate – a 45 minute screening at a near-peak hour of a special show by the members of this year's festival'.<sup>64</sup> Entitled *I Hear the Blues*, this show was a recording of the 1963 tour produced by John Hamp and directed by Philip Casson for Granada Television – from 1956, the enterprising ITV contractor for the north of England. Unlike his peers at the BBC, Hamp seemed to have an inside edge on popular culture, securing early TV appearances for the Beatles and overseeing a series of programmes devoted to American jazz and rock 'n' roll featuring Count Basie, Jerry Lee Lewis, Little Richard and Sarah Vaughan among others. In May 1964, Hamp and Casson collaborated again and produced another, much more elaborately staged broadcast for Granada entitled *The Blues and Gospel Train* featuring members of a tour dubbed the American Folk Blues and Gospel Caravan. Both *I Hear the Blues* and *The Blues and Gospel Train* were aired on several networks to an audience of over ten million viewers across the nation.<sup>65</sup>

Staged and recorded at a time of burgeoning interest in television as a mass medium, Granada's programmes relied upon a purist conception of the blues to frame the music for British viewers – betraying a viewpoint strikingly at odds with (or simply oblivious to) the realities of modern black experience in the US. Indeed, this purist framing engendered a host of unreconciled incongruities, such as the presence of microphone and amplification technology amid the signifiers of rustic primitivism.

<sup>63</sup> Roger Eagle, 'Editorial', *R'NB Scene*, 1/2 (August 1964), 2.

<sup>64</sup> Simon A. Napier, in *Blues Unlimited*, 8 (January 1964), 19. On the 20-year embargo on foreign performers that preceded this era, see Martin Cloonan and Matt Brennan, 'Alien Invasions: The British Musicians' Union and Foreign Musicians', *Popular Music*, 32 (2013), 277–95.

<sup>65</sup> 'Television Programmes', *The Times*, 18 December 1963, 13; 'Television Programmes', *The Times*, 19 August 1964, 3. These tours were subtitled 'A Documentary of the Authentic Blues'; performances from both events can be found on the DVD *The American Folk Blues Festival: The British Tours, 1963–1966* (Universal, 2007). See also Rob Turnock, *Television and Consumer Culture: Britain and the Transformation of Modernity* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), and Mike Brocken, 'Granada TV, Johnny Hamp, and *The Blues and Gospel Train*: Masters of Reality', *Popular Music and Television in Britain*, ed. Ian Inglis (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 197–212.

The diverse line-up of the tours from which the programmes were drawn echoed these contradictions by representing contrasting exponents of the genre, desirous of pleasing overlapping yet distinct audiences of ‘moldy figs’ and fans of Chicago-style electric R&B. *I Hear the Blues*, for instance, was introduced by the pianist Memphis Slim and comprised hootenanny-like performances by Willie Dixon, Lonnie Johnson, Matt ‘Guitar’ Murphy, Victoria Spivey, Muddy Waters, Big Joe Williams and Sonny Boy Williamson II, backed by Otis Spann and Bill Stepney. These performers were situated on a low, dimly lit stage platform with wooden walkways that extended into tiered seating. The rough-hewn construction mirrored the use of an antiquated ‘wild western’ typeface throughout the broadcast, thus designating a model of authenticity revolving around frontier independence, nostalgia and agrarian subsistence. This down-home setting, however, was difficult to square with the musicians’ elegant attire, the presence of a polished grand piano and Murphy’s gleaming electric guitar – revealing a marked dissonance between the aspirations and urbane self-presentation of black artists and an imposed emphasis on uncompromised cultural stasis. The programme thus exacerbated what one critic poignantly described as the already ‘surrealistic and improbable’ sight of watching celebrated Chicago club musicians perform in ‘vast concert hall’ settings for European spectators.<sup>66</sup>

*The Blues and Gospel Train* expanded upon these staging practices and contradictions, situating black artists among even more explicit signs of quondam rural poverty while incorporating contemporaneous trends in British Merseybeat. Audience members for the recording were required to contribute to this atmosphere of simplicity, with tickets advising that ‘casual gear’ such as denims and sweaters was ‘essential’ – a stipulation overlooked by a number of well-dressed Mods.<sup>67</sup> The broadcast began with shots of Manchester Central station, where a billboard and a tannoy message announced a special departure to ‘Chorltonville and all stations south’ – the train’s compass bearing deliberately alluding to the Mississippi Delta in an ironic reversal of the Great Migrations that had seen millions of African Americans escape southern racial terror for the urban north.<sup>68</sup> After running riotously along the platform in a scene that prefigured the opening shots of Richard Lester’s *A Hard Day’s Night* (released just two months after the show was filmed), young blues fans boarded the carriages of a vintage steam locomotive complete with cowcatcher grill and smokestack to the sound of field hollers as the performers were introduced on screen: Cousin Joe Pleasants, Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry, Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Muddy Waters, backed by Ransom Knowling, Willie Smith and Otis Spann. On arrival, these passengers joined an audience already seated in tiers on one platform. Across the tracks stood the

<sup>66</sup> G. E. Lambert, ‘The American Folk, Blues and Gospel Caravan’, *Jazz Journal*, 17/6 (June 1964), 11.

<sup>67</sup> See Peter Goldsmith’s ticket reproduced online at [http://www.disused-stations.org.uk/w/wilbraham\\_road/index.shtml](http://www.disused-stations.org.uk/w/wilbraham_road/index.shtml) (accessed 20 March 2013).

<sup>68</sup> See Farah Jasmine Griffin, ‘Who Set You Flowin?’ *The African-American Migration Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). The recording location was a disused station at Wilbraham Road (formerly Alexandra Park) on the Fallowfield loop line in Chorlton-cum-Hardy.





Figure 1. Photograph of the set for *The Blues and Gospel Train*, Wilbraham Road Station, Manchester, 7 May 1964. Performers, left to right: Muddy Waters, Cousin Joe Pleasants, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee. © Trinity Mirror / Mirrorpix / Alamy. Used with permission.

recreation of a dilapidated railroad station (see [Figure 1](#)). No expense had been spared in creating an impression of realism: Hamp recalled that they ‘blew the whole budget and had over seventy of the stage and maintenance staff building the set’.<sup>69</sup> Punctuated by iron pillars, this platform stage comprised broken shutters, cotton bales, a cart on wagon wheels, printed bill posters, straw, wooden barrels, a rocking chair, a vintage upright piano, gas lamps and even a live goat. Perhaps the most striking moment of stagecraft, however, involved Tharpe’s approach to the platform sat atop a horse-drawn surrey carriage. The producers were aiming, in other words, to locate this music around the turn of the twentieth century – roughly a decade before the majority of featured performers had been born.

<sup>69</sup> Quoted in ‘When the Blues Train Rolled into Chorlton’, *Manchester Evening News*, 1 October 2007 (<<http://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/local-news/when-the-blues-train-rolled-into-chorlton-1049592>>, accessed 20 March 2013).

Such dramaturgy, it should be noted, was not untypical at the time and echoed similar moments of white involvement in the framing of blues during the era of the civil rights struggle and black liberation in the US. Indeed, as Ulrich Adelt notes, the confluence of an unthreatening, anachronistic or sentimental conceptualization of black culture with a period of racial unrest defined by the ideals of Martin Luther King, Jr and Malcolm X was no coincidence: although considered ‘an antiracist move’, he argues, involvement in the blues entailed a disregard of contemporary black politics and an entrenchment of racialized difference that ‘helped to create a depoliticized and commercially charged blues culture’.<sup>70</sup> Hence, this revivalist culture was unequivocally political – the very act of attempted depoliticization itself constituting a politicized turn towards the comfort and safety of a past defined by white supremacy. Needless to say, the cultural memory of the rural south shared by labourers descended from former slaves was somewhat less comforting and nostalgic than that deployed in the service of entertaining the new mass audience for blues that emerged during the 1960s. Symptomatic of this revivalist vision was the Newport Folk Festival, where in 1964 black artists were forced to inhabit a segregated and sparsely furnished cabin referred to as ‘blues house’.<sup>71</sup> In the same spirit, Alan Lomax insisted two years later that Son House, Skip James, Bukka White and Howlin’ Wolf perform in an ersatz Delta juke joint for a documentary film. Liner notes to a recent DVD release of the footage state that this film is ‘suspended out of time in a super-real present, a nonspecific “bluestime”’.<sup>72</sup> The proxy for blues origins lurks precisely in this space of hyperreal simulation – a mythical space coexistent with Granada’s blues programmes.

Looking at the reception of one performer in particular will enable us to trace the convoluted interactions between these various strategies of representation and the mutable self-presentation of African American artists during the revival. Perhaps more than any other performer, Muddy Waters found himself required to comply with the inconsistent demands of what Benjamin Filene has described as a ‘cult of authenticity’.<sup>73</sup> In *The Blues and Gospel Train*, Waters was cast in the archetypal role of blues drifter famously articulated by bandleader W. C. Handy:

As I nodded in the railroad station while waiting for a train that had been delayed nine hours, life suddenly took me by the shoulder and wakened me with a start. A lean, loose-jointed Negro had commenced plunking a guitar beside me while I slept. His clothes were rags; his feet peeped out of his shoes. His face had on it some of the sadness of the ages. As he played, he pressed a knife on the strings of the guitar in a manner popularized by

<sup>70</sup> Ulrich Adelt, *Blues Music in the Sixties: A Story in Black and White* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 2.

<sup>71</sup> See *ibid.*, 49.

<sup>72</sup> Mark Humphrey, liner notes to *Devil Got My Woman: Blues at Newport, 1966* (Vestapol 13049, 2001).

<sup>73</sup> Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 76.



Hawaiian guitarists who used steel bars. The effect was unforgettable. His song, too, struck me instantly.

Goin' where the Southern cross' the Dog.

The singer repeated the line three times, accompanying himself on the guitar with the weirdest music I had ever heard. The tune stayed in my mind. When the singer paused, I leaned over and asked him what the words meant. He rolled his eyes, showing a trace of mild amusement. Perhaps I should have known, but he didn't mind explaining.<sup>74</sup>

Selected from Handy's rich, detailed and colourful account of black musicking at the turn of the twentieth century, this vignette forged a nexus of powerfully emotive tropes that would come to define white investment in the blues.

As the second half of *The Blues and Gospel Train* began, a camera tracked Waters as he emerged from the surrounding darkness, carrying a large leather travel bag and wandering despondently along empty railroad tracks towards the station singing a rendition of his 1964 Chess release 'You Can't Lose What You Ain't Never Had'.<sup>75</sup> Fittingly, the song's protagonist sketches a lament of inordinate loss while suggesting, in a darkly ironic tone, that such loss was as inconceivable as having a 'sweet little girl', sufficient money and his own home in the first place – hinting at an abject independence gained from not having to worry about the concept of loss itself. Less sharply attired than usual and employing a more subdued vocal delivery than on record, Waters used a bottleneck slide on his Telecaster when he reached the platform, alluding to yet transforming his pre-Chicago style while creating the very same sounds of knife on guitar that Handy had witnessed from the anonymous Mississippi bard. Utilizing Waters's body as a performative surrogate by choreographing his actions to resonate with this vision, *The Blues and Gospel Train* was thus employing him in the service of what Roach refers to as 'kinesthetic imagination'.<sup>76</sup> Waters, in effect, became blues incarnate through this performance – constituting a virtual aesthetic ideal by

<sup>74</sup> William Christopher Handy, *Father of the Blues: An Autobiography*, ed. Arna Bontemps (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1957), 74. Handy's description of 'blind singers and footloose bards' in Clarksdale reveals the existence of commercialism and a profoundly under-acknowledged textuality in early blues culture: 'Usually the fellows were destitute. Some came sauntering down the railroad tracks, others dropped from freight cars, while still others caught rides on the big road and entered town on top of cotton bales. A favorite hangout with them was the railroad station. There, surrounded by crowds of country folks, they would pour out their hearts in song. [...] They earned their living by selling their own songs – "ballets", as they called them – and I'm ready to say in their behalf that seldom did their creations lack imagination. Many a less gifted songsmith has plied his trade with passing success in Tin Pan Alley' (pp. 87–8). For biographical information, see David Robertson, *W. C. Handy: The Life and Times of the Man Who Made the Blues* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009).

<sup>75</sup> 'You Can't Lose What You Ain't Never Had' was released in 1964 on Chess Records as the B-side to 'The Same Thing' (1895). A version of the song was also included on the 1969 album *Fathers and Sons* (LP-127).

<sup>76</sup> Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 27.

substituting the complexities of southern culture and African American history in favour of an effigy composed for white eyes.

However unintentionally, the programme had also hit on a crucial theme in black consciousness. Marked by liminality, transience and intersection, as Baker notes, the railroad is key to the blues syntagm as 'an instrumental imitation of *train-wheels-over-track-junctures*'.<sup>77</sup> Precipitating the R&B genre by transporting southerners north towards employment in more racially tolerant environments such as Chicago, the railroad has been central to African American history – compounded by the subtextual implications it carried in slave songs.<sup>78</sup> The railroad, as Ayana Smith argues, is a mediating device analogous to recurrent tropes of borders, crossroads and doubleness which 'represent attempts to reconcile the traditional with the modern, the African with the American, the self with the Other'.<sup>79</sup> Such themes figure strongly in Waters's performance: although he begins by singing on the 'wrong' side of the tracks among the disembarking crowd, when he walks towards the station for his second appearance he finds the stage platform to his left and the white audience seated to his right. This crossroads, however, instantiated a predetermined, not self-determining, choice: conditioned by revivalist imagination, the audience's gaze forced Waters to make himself at home amid the iconography of the southern station – reinhabiting an exploitative past as a sharecropper in Clarksdale which he had done his best to leave through ambition, aptitude and professional ingenuity. Indeed, as Smith argues, the train is not a straightforward metaphor for liberation as it simultaneously brings social discord. Even if Granada's division of (white) audience and (black) performers on opposite sides of the track was simply pragmatic, it unwittingly revealed a far deeper cultural seam steeped figuratively in the history of colonialism, capitalism, chattel slavery and *de jure* segregation: manual labour, organic expressivity and the primitive Other split from the genteel spectator, the affluent consumer and the colour of institutionalized authority.

The critic John Broven later recalled that Waters's performance had been 'presented in a plodding folk blues format' to meet European expectations.<sup>80</sup> Waters, we should not forget, was no stranger to satisfying audience demands: in the tradition of Broonzy and Hopkins, he willingly acted out a variety of personae as a professional entertainer. Following waves of black migration, he had moved from Mississippi to Chicago in 1943, refining and amplifying his acoustic sound in response to the urban environment.<sup>81</sup> His first hit, however, returned to a Delta style but on electric guitar, creating what Filene describes as 'a new hybrid of downhome and urban

<sup>77</sup> Houston A. Baker, Jr, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 8.

<sup>78</sup> See Ayana Smith, 'Blues, Criticism, and the Signifying Trickster', *Popular Music*, 24 (2005), 179–91.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>80</sup> Quoted in Gayle F. Wald, *Shout, Sister, Shout! The Untold Story of Rock-and-Roll Trailblazer Sister Rosetta Tharpe* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2007), 188.

<sup>81</sup> Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 87.

elements' for a burgeoning market of southern migrants.<sup>82</sup> As demand shifted towards a white market in the 1960s, Waters modified his aesthetic accordingly – self-consciously altering his act on returning to Britain in 1963, as he told *Melody Maker*:

I was surprised this time. [...] If you remember, I got a little criticism last time [in 1958] for playing electric guitar. Many people asked to hear me on straight guitar, and this time I brought one with me. I only got it a little while ago – it's Willie Dixon's really – and I been practicing hard, been using electric so long, I'm just getting used to it again. Now, when I come back, I find everyone is using electric, and playing as loud as they can get it. In the clubs at home, I do two or three numbers without guitar, and then I sing a lot with guitar. I don't use acoustic in the clubs – they wouldn't hear me – but I'll use it on the college tour.<sup>83</sup>

Waters clearly felt uncomfortable returning to an acoustic instrument he had long abandoned but was conscious of having to negotiate externally imposed shifts of value – anticipating the sanctioned behaviour for a black artist caught up in a blues resurgence torn between agrarian purism and contemporary R&B.

It was owing to this very aptitude for adaptation, however, that Waters fell foul of an ideology valuing tenacity over and above theatrical talent. Singing as he would in a club, Waters decided to abandon the guitar entirely for his rendition of 'Got My Mojo Working' on *I Hear the Blues* – resulting in a refined performance that contrasted sharply with the persona he would adopt the following year for *The Blues and Gospel Train*. Purists saw through this chameleon disguise, preferring the field recordings he had made for Alan Lomax in the early 1940s. Underscoring distinctions between 'the genuine folk artist' and 'second-rate commercial pastiche', for example, John Barrie and Roynon Cillings proposed in *Jazz Journal* that *I Hear the Blues* represented a 'debasing of the blues through the pressure of commercial interests'.<sup>84</sup> In their opinion, 'One [had] only to compare the simple intensity of the early Muddy Waters with the suave night-club performance which he gave on TV, to realise the extent of his personal decline.'<sup>85</sup> A review of Waters's 1964 album *Folk Singer* in *Blues Unlimited* demonstrates that many fans equally rejected what they felt to be commercially driven role play. Describing the album as 'a great disappointment' that lacked 'real feeling', Pete Lowry wrote that he wished 'Muddy had not been so adaptable to the times'.<sup>86</sup> Such mercurial and frequently irreconcilable views generated a potential minefield

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>83</sup> 'London – It's the New Chicago!'

<sup>84</sup> John Barrie and Roynon Cillings, 'True Blue', *Jazz Journal*, 17/2 (February 1964), 27.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Pete Lowry, 'Muddy Waters, Folk Singer', *Blues Unlimited*, 12 (June 1964), 15. Such opinions bring into question the extent to which Waters was ever able to 'master' the cult of authenticity, as Filene claims he did.

of double binds for artists attempting to gauge and satisfy audience desires. Those meeting with derision were therefore not only performers who had forsaken their rustic roots, but also those who too overtly toed the line of 'folk' authenticity by refashioning their identities. Linked, in other words, to perceived sincerity, value was indexed by the extent to which the necessarily protean performativity of black musicians was elided or erased altogether.

Revealing the gendered underpinnings of such attacks, the pianist Victoria Spivy was decried by Barrie and Cillings as 'a commercial entertainer fawning for popularity' – thanks to her 'raucous screams and vaudeville antics', they wrote, all emotional depth was 'completely lost'.<sup>87</sup> This outlook was indebted to Charters's *The Country Blues*, in which Waters's Chess recordings had been dismissed as reaching 'the same level of banality' as 'the city blues singing of the women singers in the 1920s'.<sup>88</sup> The value hierarchy was unmistakable: 'dull, obscene party blues' sung by women set against the 'cry of heartsick, beaten man'.<sup>89</sup> In a perceptive article for *Jazz Monthly*, John Postgate suggested that these issues with *I Hear the Blues* resulted from the fact that its line-up was, paradoxically, far more authentic than the authenticity coveted by British fans: 'The blues is still a living entertainment in the U.S.A.,' he wrote, 'and a highly unsophisticated form of entertainment. This is what our visitors tried to provide. Gimmicks, novelty numbers, simple humour and vibrant guitars are what the customers pay for.'<sup>90</sup> Postgate concluded by declaring that he saw 'no reason why the blues singer should be condemned to moan 13½ bars over a tonic chord for the sake of some folksy European romantics', but conceded that artists would inevitably 'develop appropriate manners of presentation that will please their new audiences better'.<sup>91</sup> One performer above all managed to hit the mark.

In what was seen as the American Folk Blues Festival's staging of 'a living history of the blues', Big Joe Williams was depicted as 'the most archaic singer to have visited Britain'.<sup>92</sup> Derrick Stewart-Baxter wrote that Williams sang 'the rawest blues I have ever heard in person', accompanying himself on 'one of the most battered instruments I have ever seen'; Williams, he continued, nevertheless produced 'the most beautiful music from it, and his singing was as exciting as his playing'.<sup>93</sup> Scheduled for three numbers in Croydon, Williams had ended up playing six amid what *Blues Unlimited* described as 'tremendous applause'.<sup>94</sup> On *I Hear the Blues*, Williams was the antithesis of the tightly rehearsed ensemble, offering a contrast to Murphy's measured dexterity

<sup>87</sup> Barrie and Cillings, 'True Blue'.

<sup>88</sup> Charters, *The Country Blues* (1961), 170.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 38, 135.

<sup>90</sup> John Postgate, 'Random Reflections', *Jazz Monthly*, April 1964, 2.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Derrick Stewart-Baxter, 'Blues Package – 1963', *Jazz Journal*, 16/12 (December 1963), 7.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> Simon A. Napier, 'The American Folk Blues Festival 1963 – Croydon, London, Oct 18/20', *Blues Unlimited*, 6 (November 1963), 16.

and Lonnie Johnson's sophisticated harmonies. In his role as compere, Memphis Slim introduced him as 'the only man in the world that plays a nine-string guitar, the only man in the world that *has* a nine-string guitar!' Exposed as a solitary figure on one limb of the wooden stage, Williams sat apart from the band, drawing dissonant riffs from his homespun instrument while driving a relentless pulse with his heel. Gesturing fervently with his hands, his face contorted with anguish, Williams sang a sparse but impassioned version of his 1935 Bluebird release 'Baby, Please Don't Go'. Barrie and Cillings were appropriately impressed, describing him as the only performer who was able to 'reveal the true depth and intensity of personal expression which is the essence of the blues'.<sup>95</sup> Noting that Johnson's self-assurance was 'not the kind of profile we were looking for', Charters later confessed that 'the *poète maudit*, the Baudelaire, the starving poet – this was the white image of what we wanted blues singers to be. [...] we certainly didn't want them to be successful and have long careers singing in lounges'.<sup>96</sup> Johnson's own laconic response at the time was merely to state that Williams's instrument was unplayable, adding: 'He don't really know how to use the bass.'<sup>97</sup>

## Performing alterity

These two programmes' staging of a 'living history' of African American music for white consumption was by no means exceptional, evoking (for instance) John Hammond's From Spirituals to Swing concerts held at Carnegie Hall in the late 1930s – events that had also featured Sonny Terry and Sister Rosetta Tharpe. This presentation of an embodied museum of black culture, however, also recalled a more disquieting tradition of ethnological display. Blues tours of the 1960s bore a curious similarity to a distinctive legacy of imperialist exposition – what Alexander Geppert describes as 'the most spectacular mass medium of the urban imagination in *fin-de-siècle* Europe'.<sup>98</sup> Indicators of the ways in which global modernity, national identity and political economy were self-consciously displayed, consumed, idealized and contested in the colonial metropolis, such expositions were enormously popular and profitable during the Victorian and Edwardian eras in London. Often exhibited, as

<sup>95</sup> Barrie and Cillings, 'True Blue', 27.

<sup>96</sup> Quoted in Steve Cushing, *Pioneers of the Blues Revival* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 28.

<sup>97</sup> 'Lonnie Johnson Talks to Valerie Wilmer', *Jazz Monthly*, December 1963, 5.

<sup>98</sup> Alexander C. T. Geppert, *Fleeting Cities: Imperial Expositions in Fin-de-Siècle Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1. See also Jonathan Schneer, *London 1900: The Imperial Metropolis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), and Peter H. Hoffenberg, *An Empire on Display: English, Indian, and Australian Exhibitions from the Crystal Palace to the Great War* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001).

Sadiya Qureshi notes, were ‘colonized peoples who had been specially imported to perform songs, dances, and other ceremonies as demonstrations of their “singular” nature’.<sup>99</sup> In the process of being positioned against elaborately painted backdrops or arranged in fictitious ‘native’ villages, she argues, colonial subjects were effectively ‘transformed into professional “savages”’ as mass entertainment for a metropolitan audience.<sup>100</sup> Concentrating on supposedly inherent qualities of the ‘primitive’ body, these methods of display were symptomatic of widespread views on race, human classification and evolutionary biology that linked physiology to geopolitical order and hierarchical difference.<sup>101</sup> Contributing to this framework was anthropology’s constitution of its subjects via chronological imbalance – a slippage in which cultural difference and geographical distance were equated with deep temporal distance, imprisoning global subalterns in a prior state of development.<sup>102</sup>

Through the taxonomies and descriptions that orchestrated African culture during these expositions, Annie Coombes notes, the public was ‘introduced to a symbolic universe with the British Empire at its heart’.<sup>103</sup> The Africa of public imagination, she argues, was thus ‘an ideological space, at once savage, threatening, exotic and productive’.<sup>104</sup> Such modes of colonial stagecraft form part of a pervasive Western discourse that, as Edward Said famously proposed, ‘makes the Orient speak’ while remaining exterior to what it claims to explicate.<sup>105</sup> As a representational system, this operation is, at its simplest, a political vision ‘whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar [...] and the strange’.<sup>106</sup> The staging of revivalist blues during the 1960s reproduced a strikingly similar vision of estrangement and Otherness: black performers were imported to Europe from the US as living paradigms of musical authenticity and required to perform in patronizing, historically misleading recreations of their ‘native’ culture illustrated through temporal disjuncture. Positioned within

<sup>99</sup> Sadiya Qureshi, *Peoples on Parade: Exhibitions, Empire, and Anthropology in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 2.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>101</sup> See Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*, rev. edn (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996); Mike Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860–1945: Nature as Model and Nature as Threat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Gregory Claeys, ‘The “Survival of the Fittest” and the Origins of Social Darwinism’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 61 (2000), 223–40; and *Evolution and Victorian Culture*, ed. Bernard Lightman and Bennett Zon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>102</sup> Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*, new edn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

<sup>103</sup> Annie E. Coombes, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 214.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>105</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), 20.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 43. More broadly, see Matthew Head, ‘Musicology on Safari: Orientalism and the Spectre of Postcolonial Theory’, *Music Analysis*, 22 (2003), 211–30, and the recent Round Table ‘Edward Said and Musicology Today’, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 141 (2016), 203–32.

environments endeavouring to stress chronological, geographical and racial difference, African American entertainers were encouraged to take on the role of living primitives with a view to generating profit through mass consumption. Granada's programmes thus engendered a space ideologically similar to the Africa of nineteenth-century public imagination: British audiences were encouraged to view blues as a metonym for American blackness in just the same way that expropriated material objects and 'professional savages' were seen to stand synecdochically for colonized societies. The revival stage, in other words, functioned as a performative museum brought into being through a long-standing interface between colonial alterity and metropolitan spectatorship.

Audiences and producers for *I Hear the Blues* and *The Blues and Gospel Train* were consequently active in shaping and foreclosing black performers' personae, replicating a configuration symptomatic of a ubiquitous relationship between hegemony and marginality. Indeed, colonial domination and what we might term the theatricalization of difference are coterminous – a process of control first exercised during Atlantic slavery and the Middle Passage that finds its idealized structure in the panopticon.<sup>107</sup> Understood not as an edifice but as a 'figure of political technology', panopticism is a means of binding carceral authority to the anticipation of a gaze: as Foucault argues, prison cells in this structure become the stages of 'so many small theatres' guaranteeing an asymmetrical process of observation inducing 'a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power'.<sup>108</sup> In this model, supremacy inheres not in a person, but in the theatrical situation itself through the choreographed play of surveillance and the 'concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes'.<sup>109</sup> Under such scrutiny, inmates inscribe within themselves the power relation in which they simultaneously play both roles – those of detainee and of captor.<sup>110</sup> As paradigmatic instantiations of this disembodied gaze, the cameras in Granada's programmes functioned in like manner as disciplinary devices, channelling expectations and inducing reflexively conditioned behaviour. Fully aware of being recorded for audiovisual broadcast, African American artists performed according to a viewpoint exemplified by the material conditions of the revivalist stage – internalizing its modes of visibility and incorporating white expectations into their acts. The relationality engendered by this situation, as Foucault insists, 'assures dissymmetry, disequilibrium, difference'.<sup>111</sup> In consequence, racialized identities were

<sup>107</sup> On the enforcement of musical performance and dance during slavery and the Middle Passage, see Thompson, *Ring Shout, Wheel About*.

<sup>108</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1991), 205, 200, 201.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*



not merely reproduced but actively brought into being via musical performance and televisual spectatorship.

But how did this disciplinary process achieve its inscription of anticipated blackness onto the bodies of touring blues musicians? In his early collection *Mythologies*, Barthes lays out an approach to semiotics that helps to answer this question, affording access to the inner workings of what Stuart Hall would term a 'regime of representation'.<sup>112</sup> The musical performances of *I Hear the Blues* and *The Blues and Gospel Train* gained their meaning through representation, functioning as tools that both crafted and were simultaneously crafted into a network of racialized connotation. In a kind of ideological hijack, Barthes declares, myth creates a metalanguage out of prior signifying materials – divesting an initial sign of meaning in order to use its form at another level of symbolism where new concepts can be syphoned into its empty shell. This mode of signification is parasitical: in appearing to be emptied of content, the initial sign's complex and contingent history evaporates. However, he notes, 'The meaning will be for the form like an instantaneous reserve of history, a tamed richness.'<sup>113</sup> In other words, its emptiness is an illusion, for mythological signification in fact relies on a form of deceit that draws on histories covertly suffused with meaning. Through this process, 'a whole new history [...] is implanted in the myth' – dependent on a distortion (although not a total eradication) of the initial sign.<sup>114</sup> At the heart of myth there is therefore a process of appropriation. Employing 'poor, incomplete images' divested of depth and nuance, myth desires to 'look neutral and innocent' and so to disappear.<sup>115</sup> Within this scheme, Barthes argues, 'things lose the memory that they once were made' via a conjuring trick that has 'turned reality inside out', 'emptied it of history' and 'filled it with nature'.<sup>116</sup> Myth's primary feat is thus its capacity to transform history into nature – depoliticizing culture by denying that any historical or performative constitution has taken place.

What I want to suggest is that through Granada's blues broadcasts we witness the curation of a mythical history on the terms of the present that in turn becomes transfigured into racial nature. Essentializing black culture, in short, *I Hear the Blues* and *The Blues and Gospel Train* functioned precisely as myth according to Barthes's theory. These programmes hijacked the signs of temporal archaism, primitivism and rural poverty in order to indicate racial difference and uncompromised musical integrity. In attempting to present historically informed spectacles, Granada's broadcasts ended up inscribing their invented scenarios onto the bodies and behaviours of performers themselves. Such signs, we should remember, bore little relation to the cosmopolitan

<sup>112</sup> See Stuart Hall, 'Introduction', *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Hall (London: Sage in association with the Open University, 1997), 1–11.

<sup>113</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 2009), 141. See also Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (London: Cape, 1967).

<sup>114</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, 142.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 149, 152.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

lives and diasporic memories of successful performers during the 1960s, enforcing unwelcome associations of racialized subjugation.

Consisting of a raised stage area fashioned from rough wood edged with diagonal planks that resembled a fenced enclosure, the spartan set of *I Hear the Blues* called upon tropes of hardship and primitivism through its appropriation of agricultural signifiers. The show used this mythological symbolism to signify the authenticity of certain (implicitly male) blues musicians, fusing their identities with an agrarian milieu seemingly untouched by modernity, industrialization and mass-mediated commercial entertainment. The wooden fences, moreover, signified an unbridgeable distance between artists and audience, as well as an uncomfortable parallel with livestock enclosures, reifying the blues as a rudimentary natural artefact.<sup>117</sup> This rough-hewn context made some acts seem hopelessly out of place (such as Spivy's vaudeville), while framing as genuine others whose rugged, masculine presence matched the backdrop (most notably Williams, whom *Melody Maker* characterized as 'a real country-style artist').<sup>118</sup> Although Memphis Slim announced that 'tonight we bring to you the story of the blues', the semiotics of the event demonstrate that the story was weighted towards a conception of the genre intended to support the racial imagination of white fans – elevating and enshrining this effigy over the lived experience of the musicians themselves.

*The Blues and Gospel Train* created a similarly exoticized theatre for white British audiences – engendering, through its representational matrix, the very cultural differences it claimed to portray. The anachronistic use of frontier motifs (including a steam locomotive, wanted posters and hardware alluding to a western saloon) ahistorically combined with southern paraphernalia (including sacks of cotton, a surrey wagon and a rocking chair) constructed a scenario rich in pastoral myth. This setting, however, paid no attention to the presence of *de jure* segregation – constructing a factitious southern past free from violent Jim Crow divisions. Providing a more palatable substitute for British audiences indicative of a desire to reconceive history, this portrayal erased disagreeable yet defining aspects of African American history. Racialized segregation was nonetheless present on a symbolic level within the programme's scenography: the railway tracks provided a means to separate those who seemed readily at home amid its elaborate mythological detritus and those who were present simply to spectate. Once again, this fantasy scenario made some artists look absurdly out of place (such as Tharpe, dressed in high heels and a sumptuous coat) while supporting the rugged, down-home personae of others (notably McGhee, Terry and Waters). As established professional entertainers, these musicians were nonetheless

<sup>117</sup> Similar practices are echoed by contemporary institutions such as the Delta Blues Museum in Clarksdale, MS: see Stephen A. King, 'Memory, Mythmaking, and Museums: Constructive Authenticity and the Primitive Blues Subject', *Southern Communication Journal*, 71 (2006), 235–50.

<sup>118</sup> Max Jones, 'Now It's the South's Turn at the Blues', *Melody Maker*, 12 October 1963, 9.

consummate actors, adopting roles that demonstrated intimate access to the codes of blues expression. The unfortunate effect of such astute personification, however, was a restriction of their creative compass.

Barthes memorably grounds his analysis of myth in a photograph from *Paris Match* in which 'a young Negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolour'.<sup>119</sup> A tautologous reciprocity exists in the relationship between empire and the boy soldier: 'French imperialism condemns the saluting Negro to be nothing more than an instrumental signifier,' he writes, 'but at the same moment the Negro's salute thickens, becomes vitrified, freezes into an eternal reference meant to *establish* French imperialism.'<sup>120</sup> In *I Hear the Blues* and *The Blues and Gospel Train*, we witness an equivalent motion whereby blues revivalism condemns black performers to be instrumental signifiers of racial alterity while simultaneously using them to *establish* and *justify* the very racialized ontology upon which blues revivalism rests. Like the *Paris Match* cover, Granada's programmes from the peak of the British boom dealt in the representation of racialized bodies – using black performers as props to signify a paradigm of cultural validity untarnished by mainstream pop and interracial contact. Drawing parallels with European voyages of exploration, Jeff Tilton later confessed that instead of locating the blues 'we constituted it': those who participated in the revival, he notes, believed they had 'discovered an object called blues. [...] Instead, by our interpretive acts, we constructed the very thing we thought we had found.'<sup>121</sup> In this context, Williams proved to be an ideal surrogate thanks to his skill in creating the illusion of deep, artless immersion in song; Waters, in contrast, faltered due to his persistent self-fashioning – a position that, for purists, revealed the intolerable truth about such performative fictions. The racialized logic of blues spectatorship, in short, sought to keep those Others under its gaze – supreme witnesses to the exploitative malice of modern capital – both disciplined and premodern.

## Art of the primitive

For young white fans seeking non-conformist exemplars, a vicarious identity politics centred on primitive, racialized alterity proved to be a perfect antidote to the flourishing mass consumerism of the so-called 'affluent society' – testament to a powerful, profitable and abiding relationship between blackness and subcultural

<sup>119</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, 139.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>121</sup> Jeff Todd Tilton, 'Reconstructing the Blues: Reflections on the 1960s Revival', *Transforming Tradition: Folk Music Revivals Examined*, ed. Neil V. Rosenberg (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 220–40 (pp. 222–3).



Figure 2. 'Dancing for Eels' by Jas Brown, 1848 (coloured lithograph print after the 1820 sketch); a scene from the play *New York as It Is* at the Chatham Theatre, New York. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

capital.<sup>122</sup> Reflecting on his own adolescence, the promoter, producer and manager of the Folk Blues and Gospel Caravan tour Joe Boyd articulates this appeal (see Figure 2):

There is a *naïf* sketch from the 1820s of apprentices at a New York market watching black kids 'dancing for eels' on overturned stall tables. The white boys lean forward, fascinated by the exuberance of the dancers. [My brother] Warwick and I and a few of our friends were like the boys in that old drawing, leaning towards a culture we sensed held clues for us about escaping the confines of our middle-class upbringing and becoming male sexual beings. [...] The artists appeared in our imaginations like disembodied spirits in front of the hi-fi speakers as we listened.<sup>123</sup>

<sup>122</sup> On post-war prosperity and the social changes occasioned by mass culture, see Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957), and John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1958). On the longer history of working-class affluence, see Jon Lawrence, 'Class, "Affluence" and the Study of Everyday Life in Britain, c. 1930–1964', *Cultural and Social History*, 10 (2013), 273–99.

<sup>123</sup> Joe Boyd, *White Bicycles: Making Music in the 1960s* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2005), 13. The anonymous drawing – entitled 'Dancing for Eels, 1820 Catherine Market' – and its reverberations are discussed at length in W. T. Lhamon, Jr, *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

By late 1960, these artists were no longer mere phantasms for Boyd: directly inspired by reading Charters's *The Country Blues*, he had become involved in music promotion, securing a Princeton booking for Lonnie Johnson, then working in the kitchens of a Philadelphia hotel.<sup>124</sup> For Boyd, blues music represented an escape route from conservative politics and the conformity of middle-class suburban life: intimately bound up with a growing consciousness of male heterosexuality, musical blackness offered up signifiers sutured to the fetishized inversion of established social norms. As such, it provided a remedy for the invisible normativity of whiteness – that 'unmarked category', Lipsitz reminds us, 'against which difference is constructed'.<sup>125</sup> Like their counterparts in the nineteenth-century drawing, however, white blues revivalists of the 1960s were always external observers of African American culture, leaning towards the hallowed margins from a bastion of racialized superiority.

This coupling of music, rebellion and black masculinity in the white imagination was illustrated most famously by Norman Mailer in his 1957 essay subtitled 'Superficial Reflections on the Hipster'. For Mailer, the hipster was an 'American existentialist' alienated within a culture haunted by the 'psychic havoc' of the Holocaust and an omnipresent threat of nuclear apocalypse.<sup>126</sup> Shockwaves caused by atmospheric testing, the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 and President Kennedy's assassination the following year re-echoed this global stimulus for existential unease.<sup>127</sup> The most authentic response to an era of 'conformity and depression', Mailer reasoned, was 'to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self'.<sup>128</sup> The foundations of this lifestyle involved a powerful 'disbelief in the socially monolithic ideas of the single mate, the solid family and the respectable love life' reliant on an aestheticized emulation of African American existence:

The Negro has stayed alive and begun to grow by following the need of his body where he could. Knowing in the cells of his existence that life was war, nothing but war, the Negro (all exceptions admitted) could rarely afford the sophisticated inhibitions of civilization, and so he kept for his survival the art of the primitive, he lived in the enormous present, he subsisted for his Saturday night kicks, relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for the

<sup>124</sup> Boyd, *White Bicycles*, 14–17.

<sup>125</sup> George Lipsitz, 'The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: Racialized Social Democracy and the "White" Problem in American Studies', *American Quarterly*, 47 (1995), 369–87 (p. 369). For an extended elaboration of this point, see Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>126</sup> Norman Mailer, 'The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster', *Advertisements for Myself* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 337–58 (pp. 338–9). See also Phil Ford, *Dig: Sound and Music in Hip Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>127</sup> See, for example, Margot A. Henrikson, *Dr. Strangelove's America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>128</sup> Mailer, 'The White Negro', 338–9.

more obligatory pleasures of the body, and in his music he gave voice to the character and quality of his existence.<sup>129</sup>

The result, Mailer claimed, was the hipster or 'white Negro'. Signified by the male body's presence in an id-fuelled heterosexual matrix, this vision of blackness as an indicator of atavistic disaffection within a society unable to conceptualize the future coincided precisely with the blues revival in the US and its transatlantic reverberations in Europe during the early years of the cold war.

Blues thus offered aficionados what Dave Allen describes as 'a cathartic means of expressing anxiety and uncertainty'.<sup>130</sup> Alongside the music's powerful associations with alienation and injustice, moreover, white male fans could use the bodies of black musicians as cyphers on which to project fantasies of emancipated sexual potency, social dissent and cultivated difference from the 'square'. As Phil Ford argues, 'the principal idea from which hipness is constituted is an image of the individual in opposition to society' – squareness being a way of picturing 'mass man and mass culture'.<sup>131</sup> Likewise, British investment in blues resulted from what Allen refers to as a 'search for authenticity' combined with 'the rejection of artifice' in mainstream music driven by the youthful elitism of Mod culture – a scene that involved pursuing deliberately non-commercialized genres.<sup>132</sup> One audience member at *The Blues and Gospel Train*, for example, recalled, 'My mates were all Mods and the blues were the key to the new scene that was springing up around us.'<sup>133</sup> Unlike Teddy Boys, Dick Hebdige notes, Mods tended to respond positively to African Caribbean immigrants, displaying 'an emotional affinity with black people' translated into musical taste.<sup>134</sup> Fights between gangs of debonair Mods and British greasers known as Rockers in coastal towns such as Brighton came to national attention in the summer of 1964 at the height of the blues boom, sparking hysterical debate in Parliament and the press over juvenile delinquency owing to the fact that participants were from relatively

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 340–1.

<sup>130</sup> Dave Allen, 'Feelin' Bad This Morning: Why the *British Blues*?', *Popular Music*, 26 (2007), 141–56 (p. 153).

<sup>131</sup> Phil Ford, 'Somewhere / Nowhere: Hipness as an Aesthetic', *Musical Quarterly*, 86 (2002), 49–81 (p. 50); Ford, *Dig*, 132.

<sup>132</sup> Allen, 'Feelin' Bad This Morning', 146.

<sup>133</sup> Quoted in 'When the Blues Train Rolled into Chorlton'.

<sup>134</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1979), 53. For a critique of Birmingham School subculture theory, see Rupa Huq, *Beyond Subculture: Pop, Youth and Identity in a Postcolonial World* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006). Mod style revolved around an obsessively contemporary sartorial smartness embracing slim suits, narrow ties and parka coats; other elements of Mod culture included amphetamines, scooters and a pictorial language calling ironically on the Union Jack and RAF target symbols. For more information, see Christine Jacqueline Feldman, 'We Are the Mods: A Transnational History of a Youth Subculture' (New York: Peter Lang, 2009).



affluent backgrounds.<sup>135</sup> Newly independent youths with significant disposable income were seen as the root cause. Post-war economic prosperity, as Richard Grayson notes, seemed to have ‘fractured traditional family and community controls on behaviour’.<sup>136</sup> Underlying these fears was the cultivation of stylized transgression calling overtly on gendered signifiers of blackness.

For many Mods, folk purism was less important than this longstanding association between musical authenticity, stylized non-conformity and exoticism that trailed the Beat generation’s vision of male jazz artists as outsider role models.<sup>137</sup> Allen, for instance, attests that teenage boys relished ‘the boasting, aggressive sexuality’ of electric blues songs such as ‘Hoochie Coochie Man’ and ‘Got My Mojo Working’.<sup>138</sup> Roger Eagle of *R’NB Scene* admitted in 1964 that ‘a lot of present day rhythm and blues collectors were avid rock ‘n’ roll fans in the late fifties’ who had embraced the revival after growing ‘sick and tired of hearing their favourite rock numbers ruined by “beat” groups’.<sup>139</sup> Peter Goldsmith, a student at the University of Manchester during the peak of the revival, likewise notes that listeners ‘weaned on Fats Domino, Chuck Berry, Little Richard and Larry Williams’ during the 1950s had gone in search of ‘real “roots” music’ during the 1960s in response to ‘poor white copies’ of black hits.<sup>140</sup> For the more adventurous ‘blues freaks’ entranced by sounds emanating from the American Forces Network and the early pirate station Radio Luxembourg, he recalls, ‘folk blues was too tame – it was the urban electric blues, the tougher rhythm and blues that was more exciting’, particularly when compared with middle-of-the-road programming on the BBC.<sup>141</sup> What emerged in the process was an influential alignment between African American blues musicians, masculinity, the electric guitar and the nascent aesthetics of British rock.<sup>142</sup> The gendered investment in guitar-based music over and above vaudeville thus became a way to legitimize the aesthetics of white bands such as the Rolling Stones via a chain of racialized signifiers – deflecting attention away from their involvement in the commercial music industry by indicating deep roots in the allegedly non-commodified sounds of black disaffection.

Given the conspicuous increase in immigration from the Commonwealth throughout the 1950s, such close associations between racialized alterity and blues

<sup>135</sup> Richard S. Grayson, ‘Mods, Rockers and Juvenile Delinquency in 1964: The Government Response’, *Contemporary British History*, 12/1 (spring 1998), 19–47 (p. 19).

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 20. Whereas Hebdige romanticizes the Mods as a working-class movement, Grayson’s findings reveal a more nuanced picture.

<sup>137</sup> See David Hopkins, ‘To Be or Not to Bop: Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* and the Culture of Bebop and Rhythm ‘n’ Blues’, *Popular Music*, 24 (2005), 279–86.

<sup>138</sup> Allen, ‘Feelin’ Bad this Morning’, 153.

<sup>139</sup> Eagle, ‘Editorial’.

<sup>140</sup> Email correspondence with Goldsmith.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.* See also Robert Chapman, *Selling the Sixties: The Pirates and Pop Music Radio* (London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>142</sup> See Simon Frith, ‘“The Magic That Can Set You Free”: The Ideology of Folk and the Myth of the Rock Community’, *Popular Music*, 1 (1981), 159–68.



music compounded the threat Mod culture posed to established paradigms. The novels of Trinidad-born Sam Selvon – who had relocated to London in 1950 – bear witness to growing tensions and hostilities within British society that would erupt in violent racist attacks on immigrants and rioting in Notting Hill during the summer of 1958.<sup>143</sup> In his 1956 novel *The Lonely Londoners*, Selvon employs a distinctive creolized English within the narrative itself to recount the realities faced by black labourers ostracized yet fetishized, just as Mailer noted, owing to their skin colour:

People wouldn't believe you when you tell them the things that happen in the city but the cruder you are the more the girls like you you can't put on any English accent for them or play ladedda or tell them you studying medicine in Oxford or try to be polite and civilise they don't want that sort of thing at all they want you to live up to the films and stories they hear about black people living primitive in the jungles of the world.<sup>144</sup>

Translated into the realm of blues revivalism, Selvon's narrator is effectively offering a critique of authenticity discourse from the performer's perspective: British society seemed only to be able to conceptualize racial difference through the constraints of colonialism in which blackness was synonymous with barbarism.

By the early 1960s, Britain had embarked upon what Kenneth Morgan describes as 'a traumatic process of self-examination' in which the paternalistic complacency of the previous decade was giving way to dissolution, doubt and declining morale.<sup>145</sup> Chris Waters proposes that British society during this period witnessed 'a veritable crisis of national self-representation' – the solution of which involved mapping the characteristics of black settlers 'against those of white natives, serving in part to shore up definitions of essential Britishness'.<sup>146</sup> Representations of black immigrants as Other, he argues, 'helped to reconfigure and secure the imagined community of the nation during a period of rapid change and great uncertainty'.<sup>147</sup> Aligning themselves with African American musicians, British Mods secured the subversive aesthetics of the blues by consciously posing a challenge to a white establishment fearful of racialized difference. Indeed, contemporaneous race relations discourse in Britain marginalized not only immigrants, as Waters notes, but also those 'who deviated from the norms of the national imaginary' – including homosexuals, Teds, Rockers and

<sup>143</sup> See John Davis, 'Containing Racism? The London Experience, 1957–68', *The Other Special Relationship: Race, Rights, and Riots in Britain and the United States*, ed. Robin D. G. Kelley and Stephen Tuck (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 125–46.

<sup>144</sup> Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* (London: Penguin, 2006), 100.

<sup>145</sup> Kenneth O. Morgan, *Britain since 1945: The People's Peace*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 197.

<sup>146</sup> Chris Waters, "'Dark Strangers" in our Midst: Discourses of Race and Nation in Britain, 1947–1963', *Journal of British Studies*, 36 (1997), 207–38 (p. 208). See also Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>147</sup> Waters, "'Dark Strangers" in our Midst', 208. More broadly, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. edn (London: Verso, 2016).

Mods.<sup>148</sup> Blackness, in short, became a signifier of social nonconformity – affording white blues fans and rock performers alike the possibility of supporting an ostensibly progressive political agenda by temporarily donning the imaginative semblance of an outsider.

Ultimately, Granada's blues programmes generated a liminal space of respectful adulation and racial travesty, generating a peculiar synthesis between the outlook of a concurrent radio series on the BBC Third Programme entitled 'The Negro in America' which featured Langston Hughes and LeRoi Jones, and the baffling simultaneity of the BBC's *Black and White Minstrel Show* – a show that, in 1964, was still 'splashed' (as one *Observer* columnist caustically remarked) brightly across the *Radio Times*.<sup>149</sup> This appropriation and commodification of a readily identifiable 'dark Other', as hooks argues, assuaged the 'feelings of deprivation and lack that assault the psyches of radical white youth who choose to be disloyal to Western civilization' – resulting not in an interrogation of such representations, but rather in an entrenchment of racialized domination.<sup>150</sup> The praxis of blues revivalism was thus a gesture shot through with a troubling semiotics that once again consigned African Americans to the realm of transgression, primitivism and absence.<sup>151</sup> Indeed, despite their superficial reverence, both *I Hear the Blues* and *The Blues and Gospel Train* encoded contradictory messages of fear and fascination – what Eric Lott aptly characterizes as 'love and theft' – in a precise analogue to the history of blackface minstrelsy: African American blues artists provided white British audiences with a racialized point of opposition for the construction and maintenance of national identity while simultaneously offering a point of personal identification for countercultural youth. The arrestingly exotic blackness of blues, in other words, was used both to secure and to destabilize British whiteness during the 1960s.

## Slipping the yoke

Ralph Ellison noted in 1958 that a joke 'always lies between appearance and reality, between the discontinuity of social tradition and that sense of the past which clings to the mind'.<sup>152</sup> During the blues revival, this joke was played out largely unbeknownst to British spectators unversed in the intricacies of black discourse. According to Ellison, the US was a 'land of masking jokers' in which African American duplicity was motivated by a rejection of images intended to usurp black identity – indulged

<sup>148</sup> Waters, "'Dark Strangers" in our Midst', 229.

<sup>149</sup> 'Briefing: Thanks to the Negro', *Observer*, 27 September 1964, 23.

<sup>150</sup> hooks, *Black Looks*, 26.

<sup>151</sup> See Ingrid Monson, 'The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 48 (1995), 396–422.

<sup>152</sup> Ralph Ellison, 'Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke', *Shadow and Act*, 45–59 (p. 53).

in 'for the sheer joy of the joke' or 'to challenge those who presume, across the psychological distance created by race manners, to know [the Negro's] identity'.<sup>153</sup> A number of artists were indeed willing to disrupt purist ideals from within, creating opportunities to 'slip the yoke' of white expectation and fashion a space for veiled, double-voiced expressions. The history of black music reveals a complex dialectic in which even the most palpably offensive and racializing impositions such as blackface minstrelsy or 'coon' songs could be used to stage performances in unequivocal opposition to their intended meaning.<sup>154</sup> At the height of commercial vaudeville during the 1890s, for example, African American comedians such as Ernest Hogan and the self-styled 'Two Real Coons' duo of Bert Williams and George Walker were able to establish a ground for dialogue and even critique of Jim Crow from behind the minstrel mask. These artists, as Karen Sotiropoulos notes, 'used the segregated theatre to divert white audiences with their stereotyped antics, enacting a survival technique that many black Americans used daily' – it was clear (at least to themselves and their black audience) that by calling on racist caricatures so explicitly 'they were *performing* these roles, not embracing them as representative behavior'.<sup>155</sup> Their performances spoke at once in two registers, both overtly (to white desire) and obliquely (to black humour). Blues revivalism, likewise, involved a complex counterpoint between expectation and evasion, economic snares and wily circumlocution.

Historically central to African American resistance in the US is the cycle of trickster tales that circulated within antebellum slave communities featuring the vicarious triumph of the weak in their ruthless manipulations of the strong – creating, as Lawrence Levine notes, reversals of 'the normal structure of power and prestige'.<sup>156</sup> Such victories were nonetheless always short-lived, requiring the repetition of subversive tactics in unrelenting skirmishes with white supremacist southern patriarchy. Music, in particular, became a way for bondswomen and bondsmen to protest their situation obliquely, articulate ideas about freedom and stage imitative mockery: in Levine's words, 'Slaves used the subtleties of their song to comment on the whites around them with a freedom denied them in other forms of expression.'<sup>157</sup> As 'the slave's trope' and thus the black 'trope of tropes', Gates proposes, signifyin' is the mechanism through which tricksters subverted and re-envisioned these normative power relations.<sup>158</sup> For Gates, 'signifyin(g) is the figure of the double-voiced' in

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>154</sup> See Karen Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race: Black Performers in Turn of the Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), and Patricia R. Schroeder, 'Passing for Black: Coon Songs and the Performance of Race', *Journal of American Culture*, 33 (2010), 139–53.

<sup>155</sup> Sotiropoulos, *Staging Race*, 6, 9.

<sup>156</sup> Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 105.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 11. See also Thompson, *Ring Shout, Wheel About*.

<sup>158</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 52.

African American discourse – a motivated act of formal revision generating puns, parodic play, ambiguity and indirection via signal difference.<sup>159</sup> Forming ‘a relation of difference inscribed within a relation of identity’, Gates argues, signifyin’ is akin to ‘stumbling unaware into a hall of mirrors’ where a sign might appear distorted and ‘doubled, at the very least, and (re)doubled upon ever closer examination’.<sup>160</sup> A concept that ironically signifies on its own literary homonym, signifyin’ functions rhetorically, Smith notes, as part of ‘a whole process of veiling and masking that [...] allows the singer greater freedom in speaking out against marginalization and pushing the limits of social boundaries’.<sup>161</sup>

The negotiation of stereotyping is vital to the undeniably relational history of black music in the US. African American entertainers entering the commercial sphere, as Radano points out, were persistently required to produce ‘particular expressions that affirmed racial difference’ – manifesting degrees of reflexivity and astuteness denied to and yet required by the low Other on the terms of colonial subordination.<sup>162</sup> During the 1920s this process was galvanized by the social bifurcations of the Reconstruction era through the marketing and sales strategies of the early phonograph industry. In concordance with legalized enforcement of corporeal demarcations under Jim Crow, a system of musical segregation substantiated by the discipline of folklore instigated an abiding turn from the mere employment of racialized signifiers in performance to an expectation of their literal embodiment – erasing the previously fluid musical culture of the south and reinforcing the belief, as Karl Miller argues, that ‘racial bodies performed racial music’.<sup>163</sup> With advertising steeped in nostalgic minstrel caricatures, the result was an institutionalized distinction between ‘race’ (black) and ‘hillbilly’ (white) categories necessitated by the consumption habits of a racially stratified society.<sup>164</sup> Britain displayed a historical preference for similarly essentialized readings of blackness dating back to minstrelsy, driving strategically racialized self-depictions on the part of performers.<sup>165</sup> Audiences for touring post-war blues shows appeared

<sup>159</sup> Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, xxv.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 44–5. See also Samuel A. Floyd, Jr, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>161</sup> Smith, ‘Blues, Criticism, and the Signifying Trickster’, 190.

<sup>162</sup> Ronald Radano, *Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 271.

<sup>163</sup> Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 21.

<sup>164</sup> See William G. Roy, ‘“Race Records” and “Hillbilly Music”: Institutional Origins of Racial Categories in the American Commercial Recording Industry’, *Poetics*, 32 (2004), 265–79, and Mark K. Dolan, ‘Extra! *Chicago Defender* Race Records Ads Show South from Afar’, *Southern Cultures*, 13/3 (autumn 2007), 106–24.

<sup>165</sup> See Catherine Parsonage, ‘A Critical Reassessment of the Reception of Early Jazz in Britain’, *Popular Music*, 22 (2003), 315–36; Roberta Freund Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues: The Transmission and Reception of American Blues Style in the United Kingdom* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); and Michael Pickering, *Blackface Minstrelsy in Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).

similarly invested in restrictive ideals of authenticity to such an extent that they were unaware of the economically necessary adaptability of professional black musicians held hostage by market forces.<sup>166</sup>

Despite being in possession of this ‘racialized power’, as Radano notes, black musicians were nonetheless able to enact agency and creative resistance only ‘through the same mechanisms that oppressed them’.<sup>167</sup> Radano’s argument thus echoes Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s well-established claim that colonial subalterns have been linguistically snared in a scaffold generated by the malevolent epistemology of imperialism.<sup>168</sup> In the blues revival, performers were likewise forced to speak from subject positions crafted in enforced dialogue with white expectation and desire. We must bear in mind, however, that the term ‘agency’, as Walter Johnson points out, has tended to smuggle a conception of ‘the universality of a liberal notion of selfhood, with its emphasis on independence and choice, right into the middle of a conversation about slavery against which that supposedly natural (at least for white men) condition was originally defined’.<sup>169</sup> In other words, the particular exigencies of African American history demand a theoretical framework attuned to the novel ways in which oppressed groups were forced to articulate their selfhood and traverse cultural fields established on adverse power relations. One such approach that complements Gates’s theory of signifyin’ is provided by Michel de Certeau’s notion of the tactic. Belonging to the other when in a position of weakness, he argues, tactics are everyday improvisatory gestures that make use of fleeting opportunities for manipulation or resistance – mobile and extemporaneous attempts at trickery and subversion.<sup>170</sup> Tactics, de Certeau affirms, ‘vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers’, working by surprise or by ‘poaching’ on another’s territory.<sup>171</sup> Two artists in particular adopted a tactical approach to the blues revival, poaching on the unstable terrain of white expectancy.

A deadpan rendition of his 1960 release ‘Nervous’ during *I Hear the Blues* by acclaimed bassist and songwriter Willie Dixon provides a prime example of how some artists talked b(l)ack during the revival.<sup>172</sup> Dixon was known for being the composer

<sup>166</sup> One audience member, for example, later recalled that ‘I certainly never felt that black artists were fulfilling stereotypes of how they were supposed to sound or act; rather the opposite’ (email correspondence with Goldsmith).

<sup>167</sup> Radano, *Lying Up a Nation*, 229, 272.

<sup>168</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

<sup>169</sup> Walter Johnson, ‘On Agency’, *Journal of Social History*, 37 (2003–4), 113–24 (p. 115).

<sup>170</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984).

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>172</sup> ‘Nervous’ was released in 1960 as a single on Prestige Bluesville (45-803) and also featured as the opening track on the 1960 album *Willie’s Blues* (1003).

of several famously virile Muddy Waters songs including 'Hoochie Coochie Man' and 'I Just Want to Make Love to You' – his choice to present a song entitled 'Nervous' was calculated to perplex. Inhabiting at a distance the role of a stuttering, submissive lover, Dixon – a former heavyweight boxer of characteristically intimidating stature – deliberately broke the fourth wall of this personification through knowing smirks, a palpably confident performance and strident melodic interjections. Simultaneously presenting both a docile lyrical puppet and a dexterous black puppeteer toying with racial stereotypes, Dixon was thus engaging in a form of ironic ventriloquism. In so doing, he emphasized the centrality of theatricality to blues performance while providing a nod to the genre's vaudeville history that disrupted revivalist notions of authentic blackness.<sup>173</sup> Signifyin' on purist authenticity, Dixon relied on comedy to bypass and deflate literal interpretations of the blues indexed by white perceptions of sincerity and unmediated emotional outpouring. The gesture clearly had an effect: in spite of supportive outbursts of laughter from the audience, Oliver concluded in his review that it was a 'mistake' for Dixon to sing such 'novelty blues' material.<sup>174</sup> Rather than viewing this performance as a mistake, however, we might see it as a tactical move on Dixon's part – an ambush and a bid for artistic freedom.

Similarly ambiguous games of confirmation, subversion and parody were played by the harmonica virtuoso Sonny Boy Williamson II – who entered the stage of *I Hear the Blues* dressed in a sharp suit and derby hat, carrying a mysterious leather briefcase and crook-handle umbrella. Likening him to a 'Grand Vizier', Oliver drew attention to Williamson's 'long, angular fingers, seemingly carved in wood' and proposed that his 'lined, troubled face' recalled 'photographs of veteran slaves'.<sup>175</sup> Placing the umbrella over his arm and slowly removing the hat, Williamson signified on the persona of a distinguished white gentleman while inhabiting the ideal of a sly, exotic and itinerant bluesman – calling poignantly on a history of racial 'passing' by repeating white style and mannerisms with a signal difference. Through this double-voiced gesture of social satire, Williamson thus epitomized while exploding the Zip Coon stereotype of black urban folly. Via his performance of 'Keep It to Yourself' (a lyric addressed to an adulterous mistress urging her never to speak of the affair), we witness a clash of representations evoking a long and complex history of black dandyism in which self-expression was mediated through the sartorial codes of white authority.<sup>176</sup> Tellingly, Oliver later commented on his 'Harlequin suit' and wily use of 'jive patter', while

<sup>173</sup> See Jacques D. Lacava, 'The Theatricality of the Blues', *Black Music Research Journal*, 12/1 (spring 1992), 127–39.

<sup>174</sup> Paul Oliver, 'American Blues Festival', *Jazz Monthly*, December 1963, 10.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>176</sup> See Monica L. Miller, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009). 'Keep It to Yourself' was released in 1956 as a single on Checker (847) and also featured on the 1959 album *Down and Out Blues* (LP 1437).



*Jazz Journal* described him as ‘sinister looking’ and *Melody Maker* opted for ‘satanic’.<sup>177</sup> Williamson, in short, was viewed as a classic trickster. He was infamous, for example, for a barbed quip about white backing groups: “Those cats in England want to play the blues so bad. And that’s how they play ‘em – *so* bad!”<sup>178</sup> He was nevertheless known to generate this very outcome through calculated misdirection: one musician recalled that he ‘would turn around to the band, and say “this one’s in E” and he would deliberately start playing in C, or anything but E. Then he’d stop the band and say to the audience, “you see, these white boys can’t play the blues!”’<sup>179</sup> Through these shrewd tactics of defiance, artists were able to ‘speak’ via sung performances that signified on the coordinates of their own marginalization, momentarily eluding the burdens of revivalist ideology.

## Conclusion: black skin, black masks

Despite such acts of ‘artful evasion’, Baker suggests, the public theatricality of blues is ‘analogous to the Afro-American’s donning of the minstrel mask’.<sup>180</sup> To ‘deliver the blues as entertainment’, he continues, ‘is to maintain a fidelity to one’s role. [...] If the performance required is that of a minstrel and one is a genuine performer, then donning the mask is an act consistent with one’s stature.’<sup>181</sup> Tactically inverting Fanon’s well-known title, I want to conclude by suggesting that a strategically essentialist masquerade was central to blues revivalism. In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon argues that ‘the man who adores the Negro is as “sick” as the man who abominates him’ – undermining the shallow claims of liberation that attended the revival’s fetishization of racial difference by demonstrating that such adoration contributed to a ‘massive psychoexistential complex’ sustaining detrimental patterns of infantilization and alienation.<sup>182</sup> Through a process he termed ‘epidermilization’, Fanon proposed that black minorities had repeatedly adopted the stereotypes projected onto them by dominant social milieux: ‘Willy-nilly,’ he asserted, ‘the Negro has to wear the livery that the white man has sewed for him.’<sup>183</sup> Transatlantic blues revivalism exhibited

<sup>177</sup> Paul Oliver, ‘Festival Blues: The American Blues Festival, 1964’, *Jazz Monthly*, December 1964, 4; Stewart-Baxter, ‘Blues Package – 1963’; ‘Thrilling Blues Package’.

<sup>178</sup> Quoted in Schwartz, *How Britain Got the Blues*, 151.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>180</sup> Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, 196, 194.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 194. On the relationship between race and masquerade more broadly, see Gail Ching-Liang Low, *White Skins / Black Masks: Representation and Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 1996); Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, updated edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Darién J. Davis, *White Face, Black Mask: Africaneity and the Early Social History of Popular Music in Brazil* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2009).

<sup>182</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 2, 5.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 4, 22.



precisely the symptoms that Fanon diagnosed: white fans idolized a blackness articulated through racial ideology that sustained displays of primitivism through an epidermalization of difference. Within the expectations of this regime, African American musicians acceding to a paradigm of authenticity not only inhabited a superficial bodily Otherness (black skin) but also learnt to perform a burlesque of that very Otherness as a theatrical role (black masks) – fulfilling a double enactment of musical performance and racialized subterfuge.

Although blues revivalists repeatedly attempted to constrain black performers in this state of pre-modernity, such doubleness and masquerade is ironically indicative of a distinctively African American modernism. Purposefully adopted in order to attract and hold the attention of white society through an intentional play on the reassuring sounds of blackface, the minstrel mask has historically afforded potential for what Baker describes as ‘crafting a voice out of tight places’.<sup>184</sup> This rhetorical mastery of the minstrel form ‘conceals, disguises, floats like a trickster butterfly in order to sting like a bee’.<sup>185</sup> Employing a ritualistic array of images and assumptions based on black caricature, spokespersons for the modern advancement of African Americans such as Booker T. Washington were able to engage and thus influence white listeners only through the performative ventriloquism of self-stereotype. Paradoxically, the primitivist black mask being turned back onto the dominant culture for worldly advancement is the very sign of racialized modernity.

For Baker, however, this ‘mask of selective memory’ is a dwelling space ‘not only for repressed spirits of sexuality, ludic play, id satisfaction, castration anxiety, and a mirror stage of development, but also for that deep-seated denial of the indisputable humanity of inhabitants of and descendants from the continent of Africa’.<sup>186</sup> Indeed, he notes, the minstrel mask is a device that bolsters the image of black low Others as ‘*mis-speakers* [...] carefree devils strumming and humming all day’; the sound emanating from this mask, he notes, ‘reverberates through a white American discursive universe as the sound of the Negro’.<sup>187</sup> In a way that is obliquely analogous to that of Washington, successful African American blues performers in the transatlantic revival purposefully (although often resentfully) wore this janiform mask as a strategy for achieving international fame and financial recompense – carving out a unique musical space that only they could inhabit and command, outplaying expectations by re-sounding ritualized caricatures for their own professional gain.

In Baker’s scheme, this axis of formal mastery intersects with an axis of deformation – guerrilla tactics that initiate a national enterprise revolving around indigenous display or territorial defence. Shakespeare’s unruly Caliban is invoked as an archetypal metaphor, in possession of a mask that ‘refuses a master’s *nonsense*’ via reference to

<sup>184</sup> Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, 33.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 21, 17.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 21, 22.

a pre-colonial past.<sup>188</sup> The deformation of mastery is thus a project of critique that, exemplified by W. E. B. Du Bois, 'ceaselessly invokes ancestral spirits and ancient formulas that move toward an act of cultural triumph'.<sup>189</sup> This triumph is wedded to a liberated black urban mass gaining the tools for modern self-definition: the Harlem Renaissance, for Baker, *is* this moment of uplift. Although the transatlantic blues revival that I trace here bears little relation to Baker's notion of African American 'renaissancism', acts of blackface masquerade necessarily called upon the deformation of mastery in that they drew on the musical signifiers of an African ancestral past. Some artists, moreover, exemplified tactics of deformation more clearly than they did tactics of formal mastery: if Cousin Joe Pleasants, Victoria Spivey and Big Joe Williams masterfully animated the minstrel mask, performers such as Lonnie Johnson, Matt Murphy and Sister Rosetta Tharpe staged a striking deformation of mastery through a virtuosity that refused to be subsumed under the patronizing trope of blackface. Other artists did not fall so easily into polarized categories, but rather presented hybrids of mastery *and* deformation (exemplified by the playful signifyin' of Willie Dixon and Sonny Boy Williamson). In addition, all performers negotiated a world that, as Lipsitz writes with reference to Robert Johnson, demanded 'mastery of the codes of commercial culture'.<sup>190</sup>

Coerced into inhabiting an identity fixed by the gaze of onlookers, Fanon contends, black minorities are always 'black in relation to the white man' – woven 'out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories'.<sup>191</sup> What Fanon articulates is thus a Du Boisian double consciousness – a state deriving from 'a sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others'.<sup>192</sup> In the blues revival, African American musicians already stigmatized by outward appearance were repeatedly compelled to view themselves through the eyes of their white audiences in order to fulfil an anticipated role. Such gestures, as Gilroy stresses, 'are not expressive of an essence that exists outside of the acts that perform them'.<sup>193</sup> We must be cognizant, therefore, of the ways in which imaginative articulations of authenticity driven by a time-honoured discourse of difference carry, in Johnson's words, 'dangers of foreclosing the possibilities of cultural exchange and understanding'.<sup>194</sup> Equally, however, attention to gestures of masquerade should not be taken as a denial of race's tragic consequences, as if the mask could simply be removed along with the scourge of racism itself. Rather, like Radano, I believe that the figurations of black music should be heard as a 'challenge to the

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>190</sup> Lipsitz, 'Remembering Robert Johnson', 47.

<sup>191</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 82, 84.

<sup>192</sup> William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 8.

<sup>193</sup> Gilroy, 'Sounds Authentic', 135.

<sup>194</sup> Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness*, 3.

natural histories of race'.<sup>195</sup> The task for musicology is to heed the relational syncretism and dynamic performativities arising from intercultural contact while acknowledging the lived experience of African American artists unable fully to evade the preordained mask of alterity.

#### ABSTRACT

Focusing on two influential broadcasts staged for British television in 1963–4, this article traces transatlantic attitudes towards blues music in order to explore the constitutive relationship between race, spectatorship and performativity. During these programmes, I claim, a form of mythic history is translated into racial nature. Ultimately, I argue that blues revivalism coerced African American musicians into assuming the mask of blackface minstrelsy – an active personification of difference driven by a lucrative fantasy on the terms of white demand. I ask why this imagery found such zealous adherents among post-war youth, situating their gaze within a longer tradition of colonialist display. Subaltern musicians caught within this regime were nonetheless able to 'speak' via sung performances that signified on the coordinates of their own marginalization. The challenge for musicology is thus to heed the relational syncretism arising from intercultural contact while acknowledging the lived experience of African American artists unable fully to evade the preordained mask of alterity.

<sup>195</sup> Radano, *Lying Up a Nation*, 44.